

"How are the Mighty Fallen": Royal Marriages among the Monarchies of Europe during the Great War

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Queen Victoria, the "Grandmother of Europe,"¹ had a far-reaching plan for her family and the royalty of the European powers in the nineteenth century. With her heirs, she would create an inter-dynastic family system with the great powers of Europe by arranging marriages with their royals and other

after the Great War because of the social unrest it had caused. The marriages between Tsar Nicholas II and Alexandra of Hesse, King George V and Victoria Mary of Teck, and the first-cousin relationship between King George V, Tsar Nicholas II, and Kaiser Wilhelm II (see Figure 1) all demonstrate that the

Genealogical table showing links between the royal family of Great Britain and the imperial family of Russia

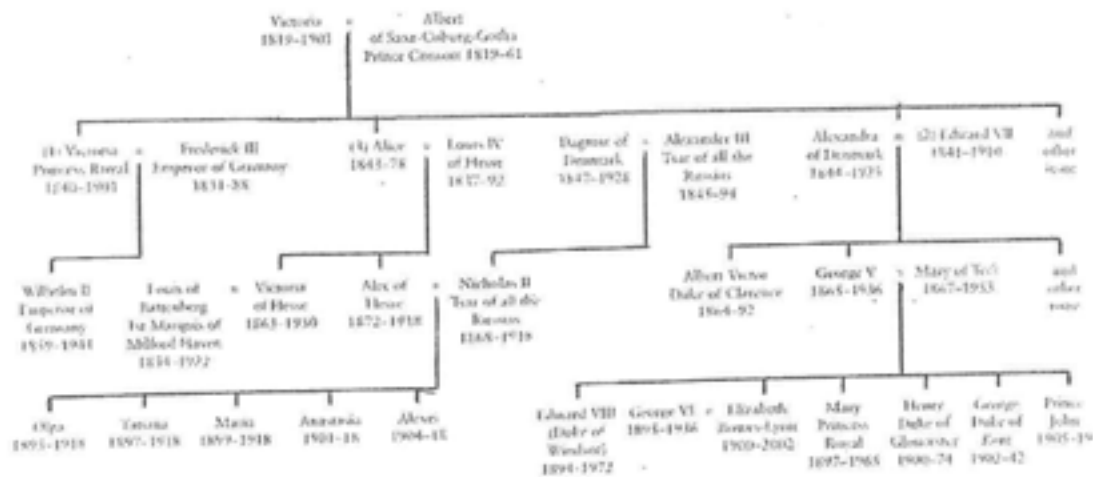


Figure 1. From Ann Morrow, *Cousins Divided: George V and Nicholas VII* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2006)

high-ranking nobles. As a result of her plan, many marriages between Britain, Germany, and Russia were formed (see Figure 1). However, some family ties and marriages had less of a political effect than intended because the significance of royal marriages had diminished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Royal marriage and royal family connections between Great Britain, Germany, and Russia became antiquated during this time because the monarchs were indifferent to their family ties. In addition, monarchies were made unnecessary and obsolete

monarchs were more concerned with their own state affairs than with allowing family loyalty to dominate their policies. The royal marriages and family connections between these three monarchs did little to improve relations between the warring nations and led to only minuscule advancements for the benefit of their own states.

Industrialization in Europe in the nineteenth century caused many social and political changes, and social unrest followed. The people of Britain, Germany and Russia felt that industrialization had given them more power by means of a growing

population and increasing wealth and education. They believed that they deserved more rights from the governments of which they were subjects and more say in how the system of government functioned. The reform movements were also driven by people who were negatively affected by industrialization, such as people trapped in poverty in places such as Russia.² As a consequence, political groups based on the principles of socialism and democracy were formed, and these groups quickly grew in size. For instance, an English tutor for the Kaiser's daughter said in early 1908 that the Socialists were gaining strength in Germany and "threatened to be troublesome" for the future,³ and in 1912 the Social Democrat Party was the largest political party in Germany.⁴ The people of Britain, Germany, and Russia used political groups to attain more attention and better treatment from their governments. Before the Great War, the governments of Britain, Germany, and Russia were all monarchies, their kings being what Joseph Schumpeter called "divinely ordained 'centerpieces'" of European government,⁵ but the old systems of power were slowly being forced to give way to the new.

In addition, industrialization caused the nations to be less dependent on royal connections for political diplomacy. The marriages that created the family relationships between Britain, Germany, and Russia, were arranged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because the monarchies retained importance. The first cousin relationship between King George V, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Tsar Nicholas II (see Figure 1) was expected to induce political bonds of cooperation between their nations, but the monarchs were more concerned about their own nations than supporting each other through their family bonds. The royals were connected, but the nationalistic goals of the individual state governments overpowered the need for traditional connectivity with their royal extended families. For example, before the war erupted Kaiser Wilhelm tried to utilize his ties for political alliances with Russia and Britain, but the monarchies were too focused on their own nation-states and what was important to their countries to be concerned about the ties.

For centuries, family ties had bound countries together and made them more united for common progress.⁶ Royal marriages and family connections between the families of dynasties used to have great significance in the political interplay between

countries. The marriages were arranged by the elders of the family, who did not take personal preference into consideration in selecting a spouse for their heirs.⁷ For example, Queen Victoria used marriages to enhance her dynasty, which is why George, Wilhelm, and Nicholas, even though they were of different nationalities, were first cousins. The political advancement that came from royal marriages was also more stable and easier to form than a political or military alliance, and tying one family into a network of other royal families could justify political and personal actions.⁸ Theoretically, the family and marriage connections between Britain, Germany, and Russia should have fastened the countries together for a common political advancement, but the connections ultimately were politically useless.

The governments of Britain, Germany, and Russia were all monarchies, but they each had a different structure. The government of Britain was a constitutional monarchy, and consisted of a King, an elected parliament with the Houses of Lords and Commons, and an elected prime minister. During the industrial era, the government had already made parliamentary concessions to the people in a move toward democracy, so the monarch of Britain was less powerful in the early twentieth century than his counterparts in Germany and Russia.⁹ However the king still retained certain influences: he was still the head of state, was a representative of his country, part of the royal connection between other European powers, and could choose diplomats, members of his council, and other advisors.¹⁰ In addition, the monarchy was still guarded by the nobility and landed aristocracy, so the common people did not have much sway with the king.¹¹ Even so, King George V had no real drive to rule his country and showed disinterest in his many monotonous obligations before he was crowned. For example, he did not enjoy public appearances, and an article in the *New York Times* says that he was "more interested in his pheasants than in politics."¹² The last British monarch to take an active and personal part in continental politics was Edward VII, the father of George V; unlike his father, George V never became openly involved in domestic constitutional issues.¹³ The marriage between King George V and Victoria Mary of Teck was not expected to bring German influence from the outset because of Britain's already diminished monarchical power.¹⁴ Thus, the monarchy's reduced power and increased sense of nationalism isolated the monarchy from

inter-dynastic connections.

The government of Russia differed greatly from Britain's because it was an absolute autocracy before and during most of the Great War. Tsar Nicholas II headed the autocracy, but he was a weak and indecisive ruler, and a Russian diplomat stated that Nicholas never did anything to make his authority felt or respected.¹⁵ The Tsar of Russia traditionally had a divine right to rule his people, but Nicholas took this idea too far and did not want to share power. Nicholas was under the impression that the peasants were content with their social, economic, and political conditions and had unquestioned devotion to their emperor, but in reality they were living in squalor and were not able to raise their social or economic statuses.¹⁶ Nicholas never understood the problems the peasants had with the government because "the lifestyle of the imperial elite was indulgent, improvident, [and] reckless..." making him more removed from his people.¹⁷ Nicholas refused to establish an unadulterated parliament, implement constitutional change, or allow an elected prime minister because these would have undermined his God-given imperial power.¹⁸ He did establish a Duma after the 1905 revolution, which gave the people a parliament, more free speech, and more civil rights, but these gains did not last long because Nicholas did not trust the representatives elected by the people.¹⁹ The selfish desires of Nicholas to keep imperial power strong in Russia alienated Britain and Germany even though he was connected to them by his marriage to Alexandra of Hesse.

According to past traditions, the royal marriage between Tsar Nicholas II and Alexandra of Hesse should have brought German influence to the Russian court. However, Alexandra felt more connected to Britain than to Germany because she had spent more time in Britain, so her German heritage did not influence Russian politics, contrary to what Kaiser Wilhelm had expected.²⁰ Alexandra's British upbringing did not carry much weight either; before the Great War the letters exchanged between George and Nicholas were affectionate but restrained, so their monarchical relationship never forced influence between the two countries.²¹ In addition, Alexandra adopted many Russian customs, such as converting to Russian Orthodoxy,²² so her German ties were smothered by her eagerness to become a part of her husband's country. A gap was also created between the Russian family and the German family because Wilhelm and his wife

did not approve of Alexandra's conversion, and Alexandra did not care for the Kaiser in turn.²³

Germany had a similar government to Russia because it consisted of a Kaiser who was the head of the entire German nation, and all people were compelled to respect him. Like Tsar Nicholas II, Kaiser Wilhelm did not want to give up his autocratic power to the new socialist and democratic movements. The structure of the German government included a parliament, but the government ministers who held the most power were appointed by the Kaiser, so Wilhelm had a large measure of control over the government's behavior.²⁴ The rankings of the court were based on a complex hierarchical structure, and the Kaiser based court positions on whether or not he liked people, not based on their merit.²⁵ Therefore, the German court was not fit to rule, but fit to please every whim of Kaiser Wilhelm, who was a megalomaniac and wanted to demonstrate his greatness to the world. The character of the Kaiser was also a bit skewed, and he may have been mentally unstable. For example, a Russian diplomat noted that some saw him as a "monster in human form" and power-hungry.²⁶ Also, an English tutor for the Kaiser's daughter commented that the Kaiser had strange mannerisms, saying that everything had to be exactly his way, and he opposed all opinions and beliefs that were not his own.²⁷ Because of these factors, the Kaiser considered socialists and democrats to be the enemies of his empire,²⁸ and attempts at reform in the early twentieth century by the people were unsuccessful.

The Kaiser isolated Germany from Europe because of his extreme national pride, which also kept Germany from benefiting from its connections with Britain and Russia. A fellow royal commented that it would soon be "difficult for Germany's royalties to marry outside of their own country" because the Kaiser had separated Germany from Europe so greatly.²⁹ However, he tried to exploit his ties with Russia with the secret "Willy-Nicky correspondence" from 1904-1907. In these letters Wilhelm tried to coax Nicholas into a secret treaty with Germany against Britain³⁰ because the Kaiser "exaggerated the political importance of [personal] dynastic connections."³¹ Wilhelm was extremely forceful when it came to his relationship with Nicholas and discussed the need for them to unite with common interests because of their family ties.³² Nicholas thanked Wilhelm for his help in affairs such as the Russo-Japanese War, and the sovereigns

pledged their loyalty to each other.³³ However, in the end the Russian government's interest in protecting and advancing its own nation overcame Nicholas' commitment to family ties, and Russia fought against Germany in the Great War.

The ineffective family ties between Russia and Germany caused by indifference on Nicholas' part was different from Kaiser Wilhelm's relationship with Britain. Wilhelm had a very strong love-hate relationship with Britain caused by the environment he experienced there as a child. He envied everything British, and later in his life when he was not accepted by Britain's sovereigns he tried to copy elements such as the British royal navy, and wanted to destroy Britain outright.³⁴ As previously noted, he even tried to utilize his ties with Nicholas to turn Russia against Britain and join his side in the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁵ These ties were supposed to help the monarchies with international relations in the early twentieth century, but the nations were too self-absorbed for these ties to have much of an effect. However, the monarchies of Germany and Russia were destroyed after the war, so the royal connections ceased to exist.

The marriage between Tsar Nicholas II and Alexandra of Hesse had not brought German influence before the war, but during it the people became suspicious of her German heritage. The people believed that she was a German spy and was passing secret Russian information to the Kaiser,³⁶ and a Russian diplomat said that Alexandra was one of the main reasons the imperial government collapsed.³⁷ In addition, her relationship with Gregori Rasputin during the war also angered Nicholas' advisors and the Russian people because they did not trust Rasputin's influences on Nicholas' wife.³⁸ She also had a difficult time with the Russian language and with the Russian high society, which caused her (and her husband) to retreat more from public appearances and furthered their isolation from the common people.³⁹ Ultimately, Alexandra exercised her own personal influence over the weak-minded Tsar rather than encourage influence from her native country, which was not expected from the other members of the royal connection.

George and Nicholas still retained friendly relations during the war because they were on the same side, but in the end, their national interests were more important than their family connection. When the Russian revolution broke out and Nicholas and his family were imprisoned, George promised to give Nicholas a home in Britain because he

was his cousin.⁴⁰ However, the family connection did not make George feel that he was absolutely obligated to help Nicholas, and he refused to give Nicholas asylum in Britain because he feared spread of the Russian revolution's fervor to his own nation. George was ultimately more concerned about his crown and nation than the well-being of his cousin.⁴¹ Kaiser Wilhelm also was indifferent to the consequences of the Russian revolution for Nicholas. He did not make an effort to protect Nicholas or his family because he feared the spread of the revolutionary spirit to Germany.⁴² Wilhelm also cut off his connection with George completely after the war and his exile and abdication;⁴³ the royal relationship would have done no good in Wilhelm's position because his monarchy was destroyed.

The monarchies of Germany and Russia were demolished by the Great War because of the elevated social unrest that the war caused. The beginning of the war was tolerable for Britain, Germany, and Russia, but by 1916-1917 clothing and food shortages caused starvation, disease, hopelessness, and low standards of living, especially during the "Turnip Winter" of 1916-1917.⁴⁴ The hardships became too much for the peoples of the war, and "throughout Europe the strains of protracted warfare finally, as of 1917, shook and cracked the foundations of the embattled old order..."⁴⁵ The disasters of the war led the people of Germany and Russia to break under the final straw of their incompetent and careless autocratic governments.⁴⁶

A large factor that exacerbated the open wounds of destitution and starvation of the people was the flaunting of royal wealth and material goods from people who could afford luxuries. In Russia and Germany especially, where the gap between the rich and poor was large, the people were angry about the royals' standard of living. In Russia, the Tsar and his family spared no expense for their amusement and comfort; their 326 palaces, fifteen thousand servants, and expensive foreign treasures all gave testimony to the opulent life of the imperial family.⁴⁷ The Tsar continued to use Russia's treasury "as his private pocketbook"⁴⁸ even though the Russian economy was already under much pressure for war production.⁴⁹ In addition, most of the Russian population hated the military service that they were forced into, and wanted to end their suffering caused by the war.⁵⁰ Especially during the winter of 1916-1917, when conditions worsened beyond a level that the people were willing to bear,

the people formed more strikes and protests, even looting and burning manor houses of the wealthy aristocracy.⁵¹ The people felt they were being ignored because Nicholas placed himself above a reachable level by isolating himself inside his palaces with the wealthy ruling classes.⁵² The war's worsened conditions and the government's lack of motivation to fix any of the peasants' problems drove the people to a breaking point and full-scale rebellion ensued in March 1917.

The Russian Revolution of March 1917 was a direct consequence of the Great War and the incapable governance of Tsar Nicholas II, who did not realize that Russia was in desperate need of reform in order to help its people. A Russian diplomat even said that the people obviously wanted a constitutional government to replace the autocracy.⁵³ What began as an angry protest in St. Petersburg quickly grew into a riot, and Tsar Nicholas panicked and declared a national emergency, thus dissolving the Duma and placing more power in his hands. The ruling classes, now in addition to the peasants, were upset because they felt that Nicholas had acted too autocratically. On March 15, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II, Emperor of all the Russians, was forced to abdicate in favor of his brother Mikhail, who in turn refused his promotion. There were no other royals who would have been able to rule, so the people established a Provisional Government. The government was now based on a local level, with regional soviets governing local areas.⁵⁴ The imperial family was executed in July 1918, ending royal autocracy in Russia forever.

The German people were also extremely unhappy with the way their government handled the consequences of its disastrous war. The war left more economic, political, and social problems on top of the existing ones, and there was a stark contrast between the enthusiastic support from the beginning of the war and the angry protests near the end of the war.⁵⁵ As a result of their unhappiness, political parties opposed to the war gained more support and began to criticize the government more violently with protests and strikes.⁵⁶ In addition, life in the trenches and the plight of the soldiers caused serious morale problems by 1918, and the soldiers were not willing to sit back while their families starved. Also as in Russia, Germany was experiencing financial problems; the government had borrowed heavily to pay for the war, so the country was undergoing massive inflation.⁵⁷ In addition, the elites and the royal court were still able to afford luxuries, and the

Kaiser was kept happy with banquets and parties in the royal palaces.⁵⁸ The people of Germany could not bear the strains of the war any longer; something had to be done about the uncaring autocratic government that would not even supply them with their basic needs.

The German revolution was the direct result of social, political, and economic consequences of the Great War and Germany's eventual defeat.⁵⁹ The combined effects of the war and the spirit of the Russian revolution spreading across Europe amplified the unrest in German industrial centers.⁶⁰ By 1918 the officials of the German government, excluding Kaiser Wilhelm, now recognized that they had lost the war, and thought that Germany could receive more sympathy from their enemies if the government changed into a civilian-based system.⁶¹ The original plan was to make the monarchy more accountable to the parliament, but circumstances forced the Kaiser to flee to Holland in October 1918. A Constitutional Assembly representing a democratic republic was created, and Wilhelm formally abdicated in November 1918.⁶² The German revolution, lasting from October 1918 to March 1919, created a Council of People's Commissars, provisions for the election of a National Assembly, and made Germany into a federal state.⁶³ The new republic was a parliamentary democracy with elected representatives based on parties, and a president was elected for seven-year terms.⁶⁴

In Britain, the conditions of the war were not felt as harshly as in Russia and Germany because of methods such as rationing, positive propaganda campaigns, censoring of anti-war propaganda, and better supply chains. King George V's leadership qualities were also "positively enhanced by the war,"⁶⁵ and the people praised him for being such a caring and upstanding leader.⁶⁶ Unlike in Germany and Russia, the British court did not indulge in numerous luxuries throughout the war. From the beginning of his reign, George was an unostentatious ruler, and his court was not as rich as his father's had been.⁶⁷ In fact, "[t]he deliberately orchestrated, quiet frugality seen at Windsor and Buckingham Palace would be the salvation of the British royal family" because the monarchy, frankly, was dull.⁶⁸ The royal family led normal middle-class lives, eating cold rice pudding, wearing tweeds, and drinking tea,⁶⁹ so the people were more connected with and grateful to their sovereign because he was sacrificing just like them. Like Germany

and Russia, there were some strikes and protests because of the food shortages and high prices, but George and the government kept the protests under control. Surprisingly, the British monarchy managed to survive the war because George knew from past experience to tread carefully in an age where monarchies were becoming obsolete.⁷⁰

After the war, there were few monarchies left standing from the Victorian connection, save the one in Britain, so royal marriages perished when monarchies did. For example, the war made the British monarchy even less powerful, so an international marriage alliance after the war would have done little good. The abdication of Edward VIII to marry a divorcée demonstrates how royal marriages were an emblem of the diminished monarchy because Edward's marriage was for love and came with no political gains. An author from the time commented that "He knew that he could not perform his [monarchical] duties without being with the woman he loved."⁷¹ so he felt that he had

a duty to his country to abdicate for a better ruler. He was able to do this without serious obstacles because marriages were not made for political gains anymore.

If dynastic marriage still mattered in European politics, then Britain, Germany, and Russia all should have been united in a web of family connections in the early twentieth century. Instead, the royal marriage ties and first cousin relationship between King George V, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Tsar Nicholas II ultimately did not benefit any of these nations. The monarchical systems of Europe were greatly nationalistic before the Great War and became antiquated after it because of socialist and democratic impulses, so the royal marriages and family connections ceased to be an influential factor in international politics during the early twentieth century. With the monarchies annihilated in Germany and Russia and the king only a figurehead in Britain, the royal marriage connections perished with the power of the crowns.

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Endnotes

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